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THE DISTINGUISHING MARK OF A CHRISTIAN

GEORGE ALBERT COE
Union Theological Seminary, New York City

The assertion is often made that the doctrinal reconstruction that has been going on for the last two generations leaves untouched the essentials of Christian living. According to the sense in which this assertion is taken, it is either true or false. It is true in the sense that religion, flowing from perennial springs of human need, is a datum, not a mere consequence, of theology. It is false if it means that thinking about religion leaves religion just where it was before. Theology, like other thinking, is born of practical impulses, and its function, apart from the immediate pleasure of insight, is to assist these impulses to their goal. A reconstructed theology implies that the group of which it is one expression is changing, or has already changed, some part of its practical endeavor. The relation between thinking and living is excellently illustrated by the connection between the science of physiology and our pure-food laws. It is true that digestion goes on by virtue of forces resident in the body, not by logic; nevertheless, your actual digestion and mine, after all, are what they are partly because the science of physiology is what it is.

How closely the newer type of theology is related to Christian morals may be gathered from three facts: (1) In large measure the movement consists in replacing the old speculative basis of doctrine by a foundation laid in the empirically known needs and satisfactions of moral beings. (2) Progressive theology is commonly associated with the social movement, while theological conservatism is found more often in the company of those who prefer the social or economic *status quo*. (3) The theological movement is part of a more general change in thought: the growth of historical sense and method; the Kantian emphasis upon the practical reason as against the theoretical; the evolutionary doctrine of progressive adaptation; voluntarism in psychology; the tendency

toward pragmatism in metaphysics. Every phase of this movement tends to establish an intimate connection between practical values and theoretical formulas.

The new Christian theology, then, implies a new Christian conscience. And there is no dearth of proclamations that set forth the decrees of this conscience. We are already familiar with the "Not that, but this" of socialized Christian preaching. The material is at hand, in fact, for a fundamental redefinition of the character of a Christian. By "fundamental" definition is here meant one that, assuming the standpoint of progressive theology and of the socialized Christian conscience, attempts to set forth in the forms of ethical science the kind of man that the term "Christian" implies in our day. The effort in this direction that will here be made is less a voyage of discovery than an inventory and orderly disposal of present possessions. Least of all are we to invent a new type of character. At best we shall simply think clearly or connectedly about something that everybody is already familiar with. Nevertheless we need not be unmindful that physiology does sometimes help bring digestion to its proper goal!

By one's character we mean what one really is as an individual over and above such fixed endowments as instinct and temperament. What one really is we contrast: (*a*) with external things, as possessions; (*b*) with other persons, as one's ancestors; and (*c*) with one's merely incidental or temporary tempers, moods, and acts.

We assume that a man's character can be known, at least approximately, by his neighbors and by himself. But how is it known? My neighbor has neither eyes nor lenses with which to gaze upon the elements and the structure of my mind. He knows me solely by my acts as they appear in physical movements. Nor have I myself any organ for fixating and taking to pieces my mental structure. I know introspectively that certain ideas, desires, and the like are flowing along; and my present memory of how I acted in the past enables me to infer something as to which of these states represents the more permanent me. This is a process of inference much like that which my neighbor goes through with respect to me. Even if, irked by such roundabout knowing, I

simply assert, "This I am and will be, whatever I may have been," still, though the assertion may be true, the only way that either I or my neighbor can establish its truth is by observation of my conduct, past, present, and future. In short, I can establish any such proposition, even for my own thought, only by noting the overt physical expressions of my mental processes. What my tongue speaks, what my hand works, where my feet carry me, where I turn my eyes to look, my ears to listen—these things, repeated, habitual, to be expected and relied upon, define my character alike for my neighbor and for me.

Here let us pause to ruminate. How is it that I am so often deceived as to my own character? Is it not that I turn my attention away from outward, verifiable facts of conduct to unverifiable introspections? And my errors as to the character of another—do not these errors also arise chiefly through precarious judgments upon his inner states? We can correct faults of outward observation by more such observation, but when we judge the hearts of others we invite prejudice. If, then, you desire to know what sort of man I am, seek an answer to this question: "What sort of things does he do?"

What sort, not what amount. My achievements depend largely upon possessions, social connections, opportunities. But acts of the same sort may be done under widely varying conditions. An employee and his employer may be alike in character, though one accomplishes far more than the other. To say, then, that a man is what he does is not to identify his character with the results of his acts, but with something in the act itself. What is this something in an act that constitutes its quality? Instinct and temperament determine much, but character means qualities which, though they are intertwined and even continuous with instinct and temperament, are nevertheless distinguishable therefrom. What we are now looking for is, of course, the foresight, comparison, preference, that distinguish voluntary acts from others. This forward look of a voluntary act, this setting of ends before oneself, is the sphere of moral qualities. The difference between any two moral characters is, then, just the difference between their respective sets of ends.

The older Christian thought looked in a different direction to

find the essence of the Christian character and the evidence of its presence. Has God wrought a special act of renewal within the very being of the man? was the first question. Here the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian character was sought, not in human acts, but in acts of God. The newer type of thought does not start out by either affirming or denying that such divine act has been performed. But the direction of the thought movement is reversed. It begins with what we can approximately verify by observation of ourselves and of others, and from this point it moves on and upward to the notion of a divine purpose that works within our wills. Room is left for a doctrine of regeneration, but its position in the analysis of the Christian life is reversed.

A consequence of making this act of God the differentia of the Christian character was a set of introspective tests of this character. Does my consciousness bear witness to a renewed inner life? Is love toward God shed abroad in my heart? Is there utter submission to the divine will? Have I conscious communion with the Father and with his Son? Has the sense of guilt departed, and have I the joy of a child of God? Is my heart freely drawn toward duty as something desired and enjoyed, or are good works done under a sense of pressure and resistance? Do I enjoy God himself above all other good? Are my motives pure, so that I act under the impulse of love only? Is there any lurking fondness for sin of any kind? Some of these subjective tests refer more or less directly to the ends of Christian conduct, but the essential point of them all is a test by status rather than by function. First get the heart right, and then proper conduct will follow as a consequence—this was the theory; and rightness of heart, let it be repeated, was not defined by the content of the will, but by some supposed source of its impulses. Character was a matter of motives, and a motive was thought of as that from which I take my start, not that toward which I move.

These statements do not exaggerate the contrast between the two points of view. How often were we warned not to rely upon any doing of our own, not to value anything within the whole sphere of our own volition except the entirely general and preliminary act of submission and faith. This distinction between a Christian will and a Christian heart is not the same as that which

we ourselves have just made between results achieved and results aimed at. Results were left altogether out of account. It is not function, but status only that places us on the right hand or the left in the judgment, here and hereafter—so it was believed.

Christian thought was here in line with much of the older ethical philosophy. How many moralists sought a basis for moral judgments outside of all consideration of the consequences of conduct? Think, for instance, of Kant's almost frantic effort to extrude from ethics not only the unintended results of our volitions, but even the foreseen and deliberately accepted results. He would not only define, but also establish moral character by a process of involution, a sort of revolution on one's own axis, or rather, to be exact, by being nothing but axis! The mill was to supply its own grist! The will was to be good by simply willing that it should be so. Martineau came nearer to a psychological view of volition in his theory of "the springs of conduct." Our acts, he said, have many degrees of moral goodness and badness, and these degrees depend solely upon the particular impulse or "spring" that expresses itself in a given case. Acts can be morally graded, then, according to their sources in us without regard to consequences.

But the psychologist of today sees in every genuine spring of action a necessary reference to consequences of action. Our mental functions, impulses, tendencies did not arrive by some special route unrelated to the world in which we live, and afterward place upon us the task of adjusting them merely with reference to one another. No; their present form has been acquired in and through a process of adjustment; each of them represents an old utility in the experience of our ancestors. It is precisely because of consequences, therefore, that each has its particular direction. An impulse or spring of action is of itself a tendency *toward* something. Hence, to pass moral judgment upon it is to approve or condemn the outcome toward which it points in any given situation.

An end that the will steadily sets before itself, then, is the only character-determinant. My character is Christian to the extent that my voluntary acts are steadily directed toward Christian ends; to this extent and not farther. To complete our general sketch of the Christian character, therefore, we need only define the end or

ends at which the Christian religion aims. A critically adequate definition of these ends depends partly upon historical knowledge. What was Jesus' purpose or ideal? What light has the experience of Christians thrown upon this ideal and the way to work for it? What phase of the task is placed upon our age by the circumstances of our time? But history alone cannot fully define the ends of a living religion. For ends exist only in minds that are actually functioning. Hence our definition must depend in part upon an analysis of our own desires when we come unreservedly under the influence of Jesus and of historical Christianity. To inquire critically into these matters is outside the purpose of this article. The most that we can do here is to state baldly, without proof, what seems to be the central purpose with which Jesus has inspired us of this generation. Is it not this—to work together with him in carrying out the design of the Father to establish a universal divine-human society animated by righteous love analogous to that which prevails in an ideal family? For short, let us say that the end of Christian conduct is the Family of God, with all its diversity of persons, all the variety of satisfactions that make up a life of rational values, all its changing circumstances in this life and in that which is to come.

This definition enables us to meet a doubt that may have arisen in connection with the last paragraph. Does the psychologist, it will be said, take into account the new, extra-natural springs of conduct that are infused into the soul at regeneration? The answer is that the impulses of a Christian are those that make toward an ideal family life of universal scope. Witness the basic position in Jesus' teaching of the terms father, child, brother, and love. Not because of any poverty of language did he use these terms, but because in family life he found the principle of the Family of God already at work. Purify and extend the affection that grows up in the family, even upon a basis of instinct, and you have already the love toward the Father and all his children that constitutes the essential motive of the Christian. Thus, once more, that which makes the Christian character is not peculiar "springs of conduct," but peculiar enrichment of ends.

It follows that there can be indefinitely many *degrees* of Christian

character. I am Christian in proportion to the steadiness of my will in its pursuit of the Christian end. The old question whether each individual is not on either the right side or the wrong side of a fixed line is based on a static notion of character. As well might we ask concerning an infant who is just learning to talk, "Does he speak English or not?" If a static notion of the Christian character were to prevail, we might find ourselves obliged to doubt whether there is a real Christian in the world. For we all display divine grace, as Peter Cartright put it, only "in spots." Granted a functional view, however, and we can at once claim that there is a truly Christian church on earth made up of men who in varying degrees are genuinely Christian.

It follows also that there can be indefinitely many *varieties* of Christian character. For functions are not uniform, but diverse. Differences of age, of temperament, of sex, of racial and historical setting and culture, of occupation, of changing natural and other circumstances—all these, together with the multitude of different things that have to be done, determine one's specific function within the Family of God, and with it many details of idea and of emotion. In a real sense, therefore, the vital issues of daily living vary from individual to individual, and from group to group. This truth is not easily felt. How can one be a Christian, and yet not be aroused, as I am, on this or that point? How can he be a Christian, and yet do this or that which would be wrong for me? How can he be a Christian, and yet omit devotional practices that to me are the appointed means of conveying divine grace to the soul? The answer is, By doing in one's own station the thing that tends most toward the Family of God. The Christian character is inclusive, not exclusive. It includes every purpose in the wide world that has in view any part of this work.

Another consequence of our view is that Christian character is not to be identified with any set of virtues. From Plato to the present the assumption has been made that character can be analyzed into component virtues. When a Christian standpoint is assumed, an effort follows to name the Christian virtues as distinguished from the virtues of men who are good in some other sense. Yet the virtues consist, almost without exception, of qualities conceived statically, or at least formally and not content-wise. As

a consequence, the very same virtue can be present in characters that are headed in opposite directions. Even if these difficulties in the notion of the virtues were removed, still a character would not consist of virtues; it would be, rather, a will unified by an organizing purpose or end. Let us examine and illustrate these propositions.

When I praise a virtue I do not ordinarily take any position as to the ends that one should aim at. Consider, for example, the cardinal or "hinge" virtues of the Greeks—wisdom (or prudence), courage, temperance (or self-control), and justice. To be prudent is to be careful in the adjustment of means to end; but what ends are worth while? To be courageous is to pursue our course in spite of pain and danger; but what course? Temperance consists in not defeating our ends by excess, no matter what the ends are. Justice gives each his due; but what is due? The ancients, who praised all these virtues, held that the due of a slave is slavery, which is therefore just.

The case is only a little better when we come to modern lists of virtues, Christian or other. Industry, perseverance, truthfulness, kindness, generosity, meekness, conscientiousness, self-denial, patience, sympathy, love—how many of these unequivocally point to a content for the will? To be sure, when we Christians talk of them we give them a Christian atmosphere. Particularly in the case of kindness and love we may think content-wise. But sometimes love, and generally the other virtues, remain formal or at least ambiguous in our thinking. As a consequence it is impossible to discriminate between Christian and other virtues. An author names as the salient qualities of the Christian character, "prompt obedience to the divine will" (as opposed to reliance upon feeling), "constancy" of purpose, "consistency" of plan, and "simplicity." This is excellent in itself, no doubt, but it is not Christian in any specific sense any more than it is Mohammedan. Nay, a bad character or an unformed will can have many, perhaps most, of the virtues. A pirate may consistently pride himself on the cardinal virtues of the Greeks. Meekness, self-denial, and similar virtues can coexist with lack of stamina. Sympathy and love can even hurt the person upon whom they are bestowed.

I am far from denying that even a formal virtue, if we think it

through to the end, will turn out to be more than formal. For we shall discover, if we insist upon having meaning in our ideas, that "we really mean" a purpose directed toward a concrete end. Royce's "loyalty to loyalty," for example, in order to be an actuality has to assume (a) a community of persons, (b) having interests, (c) which are worthy ends for my will. Yet, even if we grant that the purely formal is never intended in the naming of a virtue, there remains a momentous difference between the form-wise and the content-wise approach. When we think our ethical concepts, shall we face toward the fulness of concrete life, or toward the minimal content that barely suffices for a formal definition? Formal conceptions approach as nearly as possible to the abstract, while material or content conceptions point toward the fulness and complexity of real life. This is one reason why deliberate effort after a virtue usually ends in failure or moral priggishness. To determine that I will be courageous or persevering is a poor way to attain these virtues, but to attempt something that is well worth doing is the very highway to both of them.

In any case, no striving after the virtues will bring one to the goal of Christian character. It is not to be had by accretion of quality to quality, or by any combining of virtues. Socrates himself saw that character implies unity, and so he declared that all virtues are in reality one. Courage, for instance, is only temperance, or the proportioning of means to end. But what the one "good" is to which this one "virtue" corresponds Socrates did not clearly say. The ethical achievement of Christianity, on the other hand, consists in its conception of "the good," or the end of conduct, in terms of the family life. Christian character exists wherever one's activities are unified by this central purpose. But heaping up virtues, if it were possible, would bestow neither purpose nor unity.

Yet the Christian does aspire to be courageous, persevering, and so on through the catalogue. This aspiration acquires a Christian meaning when each of these virtues is definitely interpreted as a partial description of action adequate to the Christian purpose. Without this functional reference the virtue remains empty. Take self-denial as an example. What is it in and of itself? It is a sort

of act, and therefore it is an assertion of the self. Self-denial, then, is at once the affirmation and the negation of my self. This must mean that one phase of myself is asserted and a different phase denied. But which is which? No analysis of the virtue gives a hint; but bring in the notion of the Christian purpose, and self-denial becomes luminous as action for the good of the Father's Family against the solicitations of selfish desire. In the same way kindness becomes, not a mere adaptation of my will to the desires of another, but treating him as a member of the Family. Justice, which has had an equivocal meaning in so much ethical thinking, now becomes the unequivocal assertion that every individual is an end for every other, and that each is to serve all according to opportunity.

How specific, even unique, this makes the Christian character there is not space to show. But a brief comparison with Stoicism, which came in some respects so near to Christian standards, can hardly be omitted. The Stoics fancied that they were cultivating virtue for its own sake. In their wondrous picture of the "wise man" there was no clear definition of the ends of his conduct. He is unmoved by the winds of fortune. Pleasures and pains alike are unable to inflame his desires; by ruling himself he rules his destiny; in dignified contentment with himself and with the order of nature, he lives and dies a king among men. There is something imperishable in this picture. A Christian need not be ashamed to go for moral and even religious stimulus to Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. Yet the moral elevation of Stoicism depends upon its unexpressed assumptions as to the ends of conduct. Apparently one could insert a completely selfish standard into the picture of the "wise man" without altering one of his features. And indeed, the Stoic negation of desire was essentially a scheme for conquest by the individual within himself when political outlets for ambition had been closed. Stoicism was saved from becoming pure egoism, however, by its substitution of friendship for politics, and by its theoretical recognition of a Universal Reason in nature. It is its mild benevolence that makes Stoicism almost Christian. Without such benevolence, what a sorry figure the "wise man" would make! For then he could dispense with friends as well as with

things; he could be as indifferent to the sufferings of others as he strives to be toward his own pains. He would not rejoice with those who rejoice any more than he would weep with those who weep. The picture of his intellectual contentment would not be that of a library, with two friends discussing the books upon its shelves, but that of a steely, solitary intellect, content to know without sharing, and with no glow of feeling toward the great spirits whose thoughts are embalmed in books.

The moral distinction of Christianity rests not upon any finer appreciation of the virtues that Stoicism glorifies, but upon an utter transcendence of the notion that a man can attain the good within himself. To the Christian, the only good is the good of the Family. This implies not only that goodness in an individual is outward-going, but also that the Christian is vulnerable to all the ills that anywhere exist. Whatever injures any member of the Father's household injures him. For him there is no stoic repose. As long as one sheep remains lost he refuses to be comfortable himself. Action, then, and not repose is characteristic of him. The Stoic rests in the thought that the Universal Reason will take care of the world, but the Christian says, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work."

Here we find the Christian test of the contemplative life. The Christian is, indeed, to desire God above everything else, and to be content if he has God, whatever else may be lacking. But what does this imply? Does it approve a mystical union in which, the sharp edge of moral purpose melting away, one is satisfied merely to "possess" God? No, for this is not specifically Christian; it is the common experience of mystics in all the higher religions. Mystical union reaches the Christian plane only when the sharp edge of the Christian purpose is there. Then unity with the Father means unity of purpose, and of labor, and of suffering. Wherever mysticism has been truly Christian, this sort of "union" is what made it so.

In precisely the same way the Christian character includes communion with Jesus the Christ. We are his disciples when we do the things that he commands us. We are one with him in the one way in which unity becomes real and not merely conceptual,

namely, in the way of a common purpose. To us he is the living Christ because in this union of wills we find our only adequate life. The Father and Jesus and we are all one Family, living our life in one another.

This brings us, finally, to Christian faith as the inclusive mark of the Christian character. The Christian purpose is a high idealization of experience. To many it seems to be an iris-hued dream. We live in the not-yet-realized; we are saved by hope. Now, deliberate and steady living in the Christian hope of a Family that partly is but mostly is to be is Christian faith. But this is precisely what we have already defined as the Christian character. The essence of the Christian character is the faith that counts oneself as dead to everything except the Family of God and the means for realizing its life in fulness and power.